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‘Maternité rendue, maternité perdue’: the return of/to the past in *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là*

Gill Rye

In common with a number of Hélène Cixous’s recent texts, *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là* (2000a) effects a dramatic return to the past, or, rather, here, as elsewhere, it is the past which, within the text itself, is shown to return and fire the writing.¹ What returns in *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là* – as in other texts – is a wound and a loss: here, the birth and eventual death 40 years earlier of the narrator’s first son, a Downs syndrome baby (*mongolien* or *trisomique*).

The writing of *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là*, then, might be considered, on the one hand, to be picking at the scabs, uncovering and re-opening wounds of this traumatic event, or, on the other, to have a reparative impetus, to be a quest, testimony, memorial or commemoration, or even, in the Kleinian sense of reparation, to be part of the process of (delayed) mourning.² Indeed, writing, in Cixous’s oeuvre, has always been connected with loss – writing so as not to forget (Cixous 1993: 7) – and in *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là*, as elsewhere, writing reflects upon itself. However, this article pursues yet another dimension of *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là*: the dynamic between choice (or act) and judgement and responsibility, which can be detected at the heart of this return of and to the past, and which renders this text, I argue, exemplary of what I call elsewhere Cixous’s ‘generosity’ to her readers (Rye 1997).³ In order to consider the workings of Cixous’s literary generosity in *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là*, I focus, first, on the portrayal of the loss which is at the heart of the

text – the death of the baby – and then turn to consider the ways in which this loss is contextualised in the text as a whole.

The principle momentum of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* is the quest to discover – to uncover – the circumstances surrounding the death of the baby, named in this text Adam Georges Lev (or Georges for short, after the narrator's deceased father). Thus, in the naming of the child, this text sits coherently within Cixous's oeuvre, which is permeated by the loss of the father Georges Cixous. On the other hand, this very naming enables the text to take some distance from the autobiographical chronology which appeared in Cixous's *Rootprints* (1997), where the birth and death of her first son, there named Stéphane, are commemorated in 1960 and 1961 respectively. As always, then, the question of Cixous's autobiographical relationship with her texts is elusive and ultimately undecidable; the first-person narrator is in an always uncertain relationship with Cixous the author or Foucauldian author-figure (Foucault 1980: 159). The quest in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* – for the moment of baby Georges's death – involves uncovering a whole series of choices and judgements.

As charted in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, baby Georges lived for just over a year, dying a few days before the birth of the narrator's second son. Faced with the birth of a severely disabled child, she had decided to have more children straightaway, so as to 'dilute' the impact of this baby's difference... his otherness. Indeed, as we will see, baby Georges is also a textual figure of difference and otherness in the wider perspective.⁴ When Georges was three or four months old, though, and after struggling with his feeding difficulties and her own exhaustion (in effect already in the early months of a new pregnancy), the narrator relinquishes the care of the baby to her mother in her midwifery clinic in Algeria: 'I handed him over to my mother so she could monitor his weight, without realising that I was handing to my mother the

whole child, including his fate his end the final episode' (Cixous 2000a: 47).⁵ The baby eventually dies in Algeria, and thus the narrator had effectively given her child away for good. Forty years later, prompted by the coincidence of looking at the family record book on 1 May 1999 and of seeing the names of her two sons (one dead, one still living) side by side precisely on the anniversary of the former's birth, it is the *death* of her baby son which returns to haunt her (for there is no date of death entered in the family book and indeed the narrator had not even been told of the baby's death until some time after the event); for her, at that time, he had just 'changed absences' (2000a: 87). The desire to find out what happened – the desire for a narrative of the when and the how of Georges's death – is what in turn drives the narrative of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*.

Although the narrator seeks information from the two people who were well placed to know: her mother and her brother, who at the time was studying to be a doctor in Algeria, she finds that there is a void at the heart of the narrative of Georges's death. In place of the 'final scene' that the narrator is looking for, there is only what is described variously as 'erasure' (166), 'silence' (167), 'a deserted and unfathomable breach' (167), 'a closed mouth' (167), 'burial of the burial' (153), 'a non-narrative' (168), 'a refusal of narrative' (168), 'darkness' (168). This narrative absence hides what actually happened to Georges, and it is this that the narrator – or rather what she calls 'the authority' of the book (188) – wants to get to the bottom of.⁶ On the way to an acceptance of the silence, of the ultimate secret surrounding the baby's death, the narrator (together with the reader) encounters a whole series of choices and judgements: (i) the brother's judgement of what he had perceived as his sister's 'abandonment', 'refusal' and 'rejection' of her baby (95-6), evoking also a wider social judgement, for mothers who choose to give up their children are harshly judged (Hansen 1997); (ii) the narrator's judgement, in turn, of her brother's

judgement of her younger self's decision to give the baby to her mother to care for;

(iii) the narrator's mother's choices *vis à vis* the baby – first expressed starkly as 'either to kill him or to adopt him' (73), and then, ultimately, her apparent choice to allow him to die when he falls ill. In this way the process of writing homes in on the ethical dilemmas that these various acts raise.

The tension here between choice and judgement leads to questions of responsibility. The quest for the memory of the death of Georges is related to the narrator's mother's memory of nursing her own dying mother, the narrator's grandmother Omi. Omi had asked her daughter to give her something to end her suffering but not to tell her when the time came (78). However, the narrator's mother says that, when eventually faced with the situation, she did not have the courage to carry out her mother's wishes and to bring her life to an end. As far as the death of baby Georges is concerned, the mother's version of the story is that the baby fell ill on the very day that neither she nor her son were at the clinic. Georges contracted a high fever and, on her return, she let nature take its course and the baby died soon after. However, the narrator's brother tells a somewhat different version: the child was suffering from a severe heart condition, and, as a doctor, his own immediate action was to treat it, but his mother stopped him, and 'the child who was terminally ill anyway' (185) died. For the brother, the mother's decision to let the baby die attests to her strength and courage (even to her heroism). The narrator subsequently picks away at the secret of her mother's action – or rather inaction, her choice not to act – until finally she comes to accept that what is important is not the narrative offered but the silence that underlies it.

At first, the narrator's mother maintains that she had completely forgotten the events surrounding the death of baby Georges, but, faced with the narrator's insistent questioning while she is preparing beans for lunch, she gives herself away

imperceptibly by rushing through the chore: ‘betrayed, though only just, by a few green beans dealt with in too much of a hurry’ (186). The ‘language of the beans’ (170) is thus interpreted as the mother’s gift which reveals the secret to her daughter, who must, in reciprocation, also remain silent.⁷ The daughter recognises that, in giving up her child, not only to her mother but also to her brother and to the baby’s other mother-surrogates (the women who worked in the clinic) – in surrendering her own mothering (*maternité rendue*) – she also surrendered her maternal rights (*maternité perdue*).

On one level, then, *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là* can be seen as a sensitive, poetic meditation of personal dimensions, the resurrection through writing of a past loss, a quest to repair the irreparable and to express the inexpressible, the mourning and ultimate assumption of a lost maternity. However, while there is no narrative of the ‘final scene’ – of the baby’s death – there is also very little space devoted to the narrator’s decision to give up the baby in the first place. It is simply stated thus: ‘When he got to four and a half kilos, worn-out, and I don’t say that to excuse myself, and anyway I was more terrorised than exhausted, I handed him over to my mother’ (47). Although the narrator does not submit her action to detailed scrutiny in the text, she (and consequently, to a certain extent, the author) nonetheless implicates herself fully in the choice-judgement-responsibility dynamic that runs through the text, employing the active verb *remettre* (to hand over) to describe her *choice* to give her baby to her mother to look after, submitting herself (as the younger woman she was) to her brother’s *judgement*; recognising and accepting *responsibility* for a ‘maternité rendue, maternité perdue’ – a given up and lost maternity. Indeed what does happen to motherhood when a baby or a child dies? In *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là*, Cixous explicitly and sensitively addresses this question:

How to think that. My son the one who is dead, my former son my son who is no longer my son. And he whom I call my son is my living son [...] How to reply to the question: how many children have you had, without long and slow reflection, going back over youth and old-age, without interrogating every word of that question which calls me into question from all sides as if I could count and assemble in short what is always more child than child what is less child than child? Have you had any children? Yes yes yes, how many? Ah! That depends [...] Rather, it's true to say that I have never either had or lost my elder son. What is actually the case is neither recognisable nor thinkable, nor separable from myself. He is a hardy plant, mingled with my circulation, woven into my roots. (50-1, 64)

Here, Cixous's poetical language and imagery explores the terrible crisis of maternal identity even many years after a son or a daughter has died, expressing something of the complexity of maternal subjectivity, of what it feels like to have lost a child.⁸ On yet another level, *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* serves to recontextualise Cixous's 1970s work in which maternity is a metaphor for writing itself.⁹ In those texts, maternity was always more than a simple creation metaphor, taking in, in Cixous's usage, the full extent of both the extreme pleasures (*jouissance*) and the pains of maternity and of writing.¹⁰ *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* goes still further, however, enabling us to understand how the metaphor also potentially includes tragic loss – loss that, as we have seen, runs through the entirety of Cixous's oeuvre.

While *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* expresses so poetically how maternity is lived after the death of a child, it also reminds us of the changing ethical context of the dilemma it addresses. The debate about whether to allow a Down's syndrome baby to survive has to a large extent moved over the years since the late 1950s/early

1960s, where Cixous's text locates it, from taking place after the birth to taking place before it: 'Nowadays, they are detected, and interrupted in the egg' (116). It is now increasingly during pregnancy that choices are being made about the survival or, perhaps more frequently, the abortion of the Down's syndrome foetus. Indeed, in the UK, it has recently been decided that all pregnant women are to be given the Down's syndrome test as routine. *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* also reminds us that, in spite of laws against euthanasia, enormously difficult choices about life and death in the context of quality of life are being made all the time both by the medical profession and by ordinary people – by parents and potential parents, and by people caring for the terminally ill. By means of a reflection on the choices, judgements and responsibilities involved in the death of her narrator's Down's syndrome baby, Cixous encourages us to be open to the issues of *difference* which are at the heart of many of the decisions those involved are called upon to make.

In focusing on a particular moment – here, the silence surrounding the death of a baby – Cixous's *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, in common with many of her other texts, probes at the minutiae of the situation under examination, opening our minds to its complexity, whilst also opening up thinking on wider questions. The mechanisms of this feature of Cixous's writing – the generosity of her writing – are worth considering for themselves, and this is what I turn to now.¹¹ As always, this generosity is in part due to the richness of Cixous's use of language, so that almost every word carries a proliferation of meanings, offering the reader a multitude of interpretive directions and levels of signification.¹² Here, though, I want to consider further the question of contextualisation. So far, I have suggested how *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* takes us from a particular historical moment to embrace similar scenarios in a more general frame of reference. Part of the way this is done is by

relating the case of baby Georges to that of the narrator's dying grandmother Omi, as we have seen.

Yet Cixous goes further than this, and the whole narrative quest for the details of Georges's death is contextualised in a still wider frame, in which the choice-judgement-responsibility dynamic surfaces in a number of different scenarios. On the one hand, Georges's death takes place in the context of the midwifery clinic in Algeria, where, it is made clear, matters of childbirth and infant mortality take on a different significance from the European context. One whole section of the book (22 pages), entitled 'the clinic', concerns the status of women and their babies in Algeria: where a birth certificate can make or break a woman's standing *vis à vis* her husband and family; where the sex of a baby can determine not only the survival of the family but also the survival of the wife, the mother, the woman; where the choice, judgement and responsibility dynamic is encountered and negotiated on a daily basis, as women plead for false birth certificates and use the clinic as a refuge.

On the other hand, *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* opens with a series of contemporary scenarios encountered in everyday life which serve to prepare the ground for – and to contextualise from an even wider perspective – the return of the past and the choice-judgement-responsibility dynamic surrounding Georges's death.

The first is the episode of the two Irinas in the opening chapter. The narrator receives a letter from a charity dealing with Roumanian orphans. The letter, calculated to elicit donations, is a typical, albeit excessive example of its kind, working to shock and to exploit feelings of guilt *vis à vis* Western wealth in the face of the abject deprivation of Roumanian children. It contains an image of two little girls, the eldest of whom has, the letter states, devoured the arm of the other, because she was so desperately starving. The narrator writes a cheque in payment, as it were, for the fact that she had 'looked at the photo' (15) and then throws the letter in the waste bin. The

narrator's mother tells her she shouldn't believe everything she reads, that you can't tell where the money goes in cases like this, that the story of the two Irinas is unimaginable and that it is just publicity, yet... , she says, 'still anything is possible' (16).

Here, then, in writing a cheque, the narrator would seem to accept a degree of responsibility (for having observed the suffering) and to assuage her guilt, as letters such as this intend. The narrator's mother, on the other hand, introduces the notion of choice and judgement – the story may or may not be true; the money may or may not go to help orphaned children; it may or may not be a bona fide charity; it may or may not involve corruption. An everyday dilemma: we have all received these letters and we deal with them in our own ways. However, for all its everydayness, and for all the impact of an image like this coming through our letterbox into our home, the example of the two Irinas allows the narrator and her mother – and us – to remain at a distance. The tragedy and suffering are elsewhere. We pay or we refuse to pay, according to our conscience and our degree of scepticism, but we are unlikely to be confronted personally with – or have to take personal responsibility for – the suffering of starving and maimed children or the direct impact of either giving money or ignoring the plea.

The second contextualising episode, 'My three-legged dog' as chapter two of the text is entitled, confronts the narrator with suffering in a more immediate way. On a walk, the narrator, her daughter and her mother come face to face with a small whining dog, abandoned because he only has three legs. The narrator feels personally implicated by the dog's howls: 'It's *you* this voice is addressing' (20). As with the photo of the two Irinas, the narrator cannot ignore this interpellation: 'I could no longer act as if I hadn't seen him' (20); and, once again, choice, judgement and responsibility come into play. The narrator considers taking the dog home with her, though knows her mother would never agree: 'My mother beside me thought if you

take that dog in, I'll slam the door and leave' (23). However, it is not the mother's judgement that wins out but that of the narrator's cat: 'At that moment the cat thought in me: if you bring an animal home like you did me last year [...] I'll burst into terrible cat sobs and I'll claw at peoples' faces for as long as I live' (23). These 'judgements' are mediated by the narrator herself – or, rather, she submits herself to them as part of her decision-making process. Ultimately, however much she is touched by the dog's plight, her first responsibility, she feels, is to her own loved ones.

Here again, we have an eminently shareable dilemma, and indeed the text encourages us, as readers, to identify with it: the *you* implicated by the dog's suffering is also referred to in the third person *on* in French ('one' in English), thus including the narrator, you, the reader, anyone. And likewise: 'And me too? And me too. And you too.' (22): the narrator (and by implication the reader) both identifies with the dog's abandonment and, in turn, herself abandons it.

Here, issues of difference, personal choice, guilt, action, judgement and responsibility are at play and prepare the way for the main focus of the text – the death of baby Georges. Indeed, the little three-legged dog is a fundamental leitmotiv running through the text (Hanrahan forthcoming), returning, for example, where the narrator relates the missing leg to her own absence at Georges's death: 'And death at last very simply entered our lives and our family which at that moment could be compared to a three-legged dog. There was my son my mother my brother and I wasn't there' (184).

The third contextualising episode relates to the film, *The Specialist*, which concerns the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Here, the issues of choice, judgement and responsibility are obvious, and relate the difference and otherness which baby Georges symbolises specifically to the Nazi persecution of the Jews. The film directed

by French/Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan, and screened at the 1999 Berlin Film Festival, focused on Eichmann not so much as a monster but rather as a seemingly ordinary man who denied any legal responsibility for his deeds.¹³ In *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, however, the choice-judgement-responsibility dynamic is once again taken at the personal level, as the narrator, after much deliberation, goes to see the film she does not really want to see: ‘It’s a duty I know [...] the work I had to do that day’ (30, 32). The film largely consists of edited footage of Eichmann’s trial, thus submitting Eichmann to a second judgement – that of the audience (and the narrator) who thus, in turn, also become objects of Eichmann’s attempted seduction as he talks to camera: ‘He winked at me; [...] he looked at me and raised his eyebrows’ (41). Once again, the situation – the narrator’s choice to see the film and an acceptance of the responsibility of viewing it, in the ‘cavern of my own lawcourt’ (43) – is shareable with the reader.

The repetition of the choice-judgement-responsibility dynamic, via these everyday scenarios, which focus on ‘everything that we designate against nature’ (16) – aberrations of nature, aberrations of human nature and difference – together with the self-implication of the narrator in this dynamic throughout, operates to implicate the reader as well as the narrator in the dilemmas the text raises. We too could easily act in a similar way.

Thus, this return to and of the past, in the figure of a given up and lost maternity, means that *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* speaks to us on many different levels. Above all, in engaging us in a meditation on difference and on loss, Cixous renders us not so much witnesses (even less *voyeurs*) of a personal pain, as, rather, active participants in a consideration of the complexities of choice and judgement and responsibility in the face of difference and otherness. In doing so, she proposes an ethics – an ethics in which her narrator is fully implicated: making choices, taking

actions, judging herself, lucidly submitting her choices to the judgement of others, assuming responsibility for the consequences of those actions. Thus, here, as elsewhere in her oeuvre, Cixous's generosity as an author takes us from the personal and the specific moment with which the text is concerned, at once, internally, into ourselves and, externally, out, into the dilemmas of the contemporary world.

Notes

¹ See also Cixous (2000b), for the return of/to memories of a childhood in Algeria, (2001), for the return of/to family secrets, and (2002), where it is a love affair that returns/is returned to.

² Interpretations of this kind are suggested by the huge body of work spawned by the rise of Trauma Studies in the academy in the last part of the twentieth century. Classic texts include: Felman and Laub (1992), Caruth (1995), Henke (1998) and Miller and Tougaw (2002). For Melanie Klein's work on the role of reparation in the mourning process, see, in particular, Klein (1981).

³ I use the term 'choice' throughout this article though this does not necessarily relate to a fully deliberated choice but rather to an act or action that is taken when other options are possible.

⁴ See also Landel (2000) who suggests that baby Georges is 'the emblem of resistance to all discriminations and all persecutions', with particular reference to the Nazi persecution of difference.

⁵ Page numbers refer to the French text; all translations are my own.

⁶ Indeed, in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* as elsewhere in Cixous's work, the book (that is being written) assumes the status of a character in the text. For another recent example, see Cixous (2003). Mireille Calle-Gruber (2002) explores this element of Cixous's work.

⁷ For a similar conceptualisation of the gift in Cixous's work which also involves silence, respect for the other and respect for the other's silence, see Cixous (1982).

⁸ See Hansen (1997) for an exploration of the complexity of maternal subjectivity through a study of the mother without child.

⁹ See, for example, Cixous (1981, 1991) and Cixous and Clément (1986).

¹⁰ See, for example, 'Conversations' in Sellers (1988: 141-54) where Cixous evokes the complexity of the maternal metaphor.

¹¹ I use the term 'mechanism' here, but not in the sense of an intended or conscious technique or textual strategy on the part of the author; rather, the term stems from my own reading of the text which is concerned with its possible effects. In her discussion of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, Calle-Gruber refers, similarly, to a 'refined architecture of narratives' and, interestingly, given my own focus on generosity, to her gratitude as a reader to the writer for the plurality and open-endedness of these narratives (2002: 87).

¹² For a discussion of chains of signification in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, see Hanrahan (forthcoming).

¹³ See <http://entertainment.msn.com/movies/movie.aspx?m=22728> (accessed 5 October 2003).

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